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ABSTRACT

Small community or vocational colleges often face the problem of trying to run quality academic programs with adjunct or part-time faculty who have little contact with the regular faculty and little say in policy-making. The Utah Valley Community College writing program, which successfully combined regular and adjunct faculty in planning and decision making, developed a plan for frequent staff colloquiums, for conversation and staff development. Adjunct faculty were paid their hourly rate to attend, and contract staff were expected to attend as well. A flexible curriculum guide for teaching writing was drawn up and distributed to the staff, and manuals for other writing courses were also drafted. A growth of rapport and trust was instrumental in overcoming a period of slowed progress, when adjunct faculty were not exercising their right to voice opinions. To continue the program, a contract faculty member was given time to chair the colloquium, and a staff development course, "Instructional Methods in College Writing Courses," was funded and will be offered again. Essential for the success of the colloquium program was the participation of both adjunct and contract faculty, with equal votes and equal respect from colleagues. (JC)

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Colloquium: a Conversation about Excellence

by

Elizabeth A. Nist

Running a quality academic program with adjunct or part-time faculty is a challenge fraught with politics and frustration. As college budget cuts continue to be regular quarterly events, the pressures increase; and, here in Utah, enrollments often increase as well, while funding per student decreases. Tight-budgets, enrollment fluctuations, and an abundant supply of qualified teachers (especially in language, composition, humanities, and social science programs) contribute to the widespread use of part-time post-secondary teachers (Torgovnick). This well-documented national trend (Wallace) has been going on long enough now for us to realize the consequences--the conflicts and issues evidenced most recently by the publication of "The Wyoming Conference Resolution opposing Unfair Salaries and Working Conditions for Post-Secondary Teachers of Writing" (Robertson, et al.). Studies, articles, conferences, books and handbooks on part-time academic employment abound (Wallace).

Nevertheless, improvements in programs employing part-time faculty come about very slowly. All of us talk a lot about excellence in education. Yet most department chairs (at some time

or other and for a variety of reasons) hire hourly teachers the day before classes begin, hand them a sketchy course outline, a textbook, a room number, and a W-4 form . Often these part-timers are not seen again until it's time to staff sections the next quarter--and then one desperately hopes their names will still be on the "available" list. Well, we've all talked a lot about excellence--but maybe not with the right people.

The Challenge

The design of our writing program at Utah Valley Community College came about in response to these kinds of serious problems and issues. First, like many technical and community colleges, we have a high ratio of adjunct to contract faculty (about 67% of our general education courses are taught by part-timers). Second, the role of our college is expanding from a state vocational training center to a fully accredited community college with over 6,000 students pursuing certificate, A.A.S., A.S., and A.A. degree programs in a variety of majors. In addition, because of our open admissions policy, the writing skills of entering students vary greatly, as do their needs depending on their career goals. We want a program that takes a positive approach to remedying deficient skills and yet is flexible in addressing student needs; at the same time, the quality of this program must rest on a professional <u>part-time</u> faculty.

The UVCC Writing Program really began in the spring of 1984. At that time we had a part-time faculty room that was a true "court

of inequity" furnished with a set of sketchy course outlines, a departmental text, and a lot of complaints about everything. The English Committee (composed of three literature teachers, two office education faculty, and one composition teacher--all contract faculty) made departmental decisions, and the part-timers lived with the consequences. Members of the two groups spoke rarely, and the contract faculty usually didn't even know the names of their adjunct colleagues. Sound familiar?

The UVCC English Colloquium: A Model

As the only contract faculty member teaching composition at that time, I proposed a colloquium concept to the department chairperson who liked the idea and arranged funding for 1984-85. For me, this name for group of regular and adjunct faculty came out of the original Latin meaning of the word colloquium: a conversation; a talking together; and, sometimes, a staff-development seminar. The adjunct faculty were to be (and still are) paid their regular hourly rate to attend; contract composition faculty were also expected to participate.

In preparation for the following fall quarter, I spent the summer drafting a teachers' manual for ENG 101. Since we paid part-time faculty only for contact hours, it seemed logical to make class preparation as easy as possible. The manual had to be clear, simple, comprehensive, time-saving, and useful. It also had to be flexible enough to accommodate different teacher personalities, talents, and methods of presentation. The loose-leaf format

allowed each teacher to personalize the contents. Word processing and disk storage of text made the project practical; and this manual has been revised easily as priorities, course content, approaches, and techniques change. As the program has developed, we've become less bound to specific lesson plans. Manuals for our other writing courses were also drafted along with a preface of materials to be used in the fall orientation and workshops.

In September 1984, I walked into that first Colloquium meeting with the manuals in my arms, almost as a peace-offering. However, the meetings during that first fall quarter seemed to bog down in awkwardness. "Well, what do we do next?" They didn't seem to resent attending; there just didn't seem to be anything to do (or so much to do that no one wanted to get started). The colloquium had supposedly given the adjunct faculty a voice; but in the beginning it seemed none knew quite what to say and, perhaps, they didn't trust that they would be heard. About the fourth meeting, the main agenda item was drafting the departmental final exams for that quarter. This was a manageable problem that the group could attack and resolve in one session. Also, it was not a politically loaded topic like voting rights or the role of grammar in the writing program. We had to begin with the simpler, safer tasks. Since then rapport and trust has grown among the teachers.

To continue the program, a contract faculty member appointed by the Dean of General Studies was given 25% release time to chair the Colloquium (however, the release time was cut in the 1986-87 budget). Nevertheless, this chairperson publishes all meeting

agendas in advance and invites additional items. Minutes are taken by a department secretary, published and distributed to all writing program faculty.

The group has taken on some of the issues raised by adjunct faculty everywhere, including a pay and benefits and teaching load. Working conditions have improved. Through Colloquium action class enrollment is now limited to 25 students. All adjunct faculty have a voice in course content and adoption decisions: they receive department memos and are invited to department meetings; they all have mailboxes; and those who teach the equivalent of a full-load have office space.

Most ambitious of all, over the past two years the UVCC English Colloquium has developed a whole new writing program. We literally deleted all our old courses and designed new ones. In support of that effort, during the spring 1987, the Colloquium met as a staff development class carrying graduate credit: "Instructional Methods in College Writing Courses (3:3:0)." A formal course outline and funding proposal were drafted to establish the class. Resource people from throughout the state participated as discussion leaders of these sessions--true colloquia in the academic sense. Staff development funds were used to pay honoraria and reimburse travel expenses. The primary goal of the class was the development of a detailed syllabus for our new course: College Writing I. Sessions included discussions of course content priorities for freshman composition, peer and teacher responses to student writing, assignment design, computer-assisted

composition instruction, and implementation of a placement essay. The spring course was so successful that a follow-up course is being offered in the fall.

Because of the success of the English Colloquium in improving the quality of the UVCC Writing Program, other disciplines are looking at this group as a model for running academic programs with a high ratio of adjunct faculty.

Some Essentials for Success

Several basic assumptions are essential for success. First, contract and adjunct faculty must participate together as colleagues. This means that all faculty are expected to attend meetings; adjunct faculty must be paid for their time either by hourly rate or pro-rated salary; and all members have an equal vote in the Colloquium. At the community college, adjunct faculty truly are professional colleagues meeting all the qualifications required for regular contract faculty--they are fully credentialled and experienced teachers holding the minimum of a MA degree in English composition and rhetoric or a closely related field.

Four-year universities who point at our high ratio of adjunct faculty as justification for demeaning our programs are committing a serious error in logic. Several years ago some of our present adjunct faculty were teaching-assistants at their universities, standing in front of their ENG 101 classes. Only now that these TA's have completed their graduate programs and have become mature, experienced, professional teachers, can we consider hiring them.

Each spring hourly positions are advertised, a formal search and interview process is followed, and candidates are ranked. In spite of the pay, the turnover rate is surprisingly low and the college has given preference to part-timers when contracts have become available. Their adjunct status is generally imposed by politics and budget, not by choice or lack of qualifications.

However, the fact that these adjunct faculty so severely outnumber contract faculty is threatening when one is talking about voting rights. The role of the Colloquium in department decision-making was a sensitive issue. All participants have an equal vote in Colloquium meetings where adjunct faculty outnumber contract 25 to 5. However, there is also a Contract English Faculty Committee. Colloquium motions on department policy must be ratified by this Contract Faculty Committee in order to be implemented. When the Committee does not accept a Colloquium motion, it must respond with written justification to the Colloquium. The final responsibility for department policy continues to rest with contract faculty, but adjunct faculty have a strong voice in shaping that policy.

Progress has been easier at the department level than college-wide. Salaries for part-time faculty are deplorable; they receive no medical coverage, sick leave or tuition waivers; and they have no representation in the Faculty Senate. However, this coming fall, for the first time, there will be a distinguished teaching award for an adjunct faculty member.

Adjunct Is Not a Four-letter Word

Adjunct faculty are a "given" in continuing education and two-year college programs. We can ignore part time like a couple of four-letter words that are totally unacceptable in "professional" discourse (because of their poor working conditions and our insecurity in the face of their numbers). Or we can talk about excellence in education with the right people--our associate colleagues who can help us do something about it. Adjunct is not a four-letter word.

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